CASE REPORT

Some Aspects of Esan Ontology and Their Moral Implications

Dr. Felix Ayemere Airoboman, B.A, M.A, Ph.D

Associate Professor Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, P.M.B. 1154, Benin City, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Felix Ayemere Airoboman, Associate Professor Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, P.M.B. 1154, Benin City, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study examines Esan ontology and how it impinges on her perception of reality. It presents a brief biography of Esan to enable an understanding of the Esan person, people, language, territory and culture. Thereafter, the study attempts a general, but brief explication of the concept of ontology, and ontology as a background to understanding reality in Esan thought. It analyses, in some detail, some Esan ontological beliefs such as the structure of being, animation, totemism, and the hereafter, including her metaphysical conceptions of causality. It concurrently, but intermittently, identifies where the Esan perceptions align with or diverge from the views of some other cultures and the perspectives of some other scholars. The study argues that in the Esan worldview, realities are not ontologically distinct, but conjoined. It contends that in this worldview, there is a network of relationships, which exists among beings, and this network is sustained in harmony. The study also argues, but sparingly, that Esan ontology enforces human obligation to co-humans, nature and future generations of people. It argues further that these ontological beliefs constitute the foundation of the union of beings, and this union constitutes the bedrock for the harmony of whole reality in indigenous Esan thought. The study employs the expository method and the methods of critical and conceptual analyses. It concludes that this Esan conception of the ontological union of being that is based on conviction, rather than prescription, is germane to workable social and moral relations among beings, including the moral relationship with the natural environment.

Keywords: Esan, Ontology, Union of being, Moral Obligation, Natural Environment, Environmental Care.

1. Introduction

Esan occupies the central part of Edo State, Nigeria. In the present Nigerian political nomenclature, it is called Edo Central, and it is one of the three senatorial districts in the state. Besides, it is one of the three major ethnic groups in the State (the others being Bini and Etsako), and one of the minor ethnic groups in the multi-culture nation *Nigeria*. Since Esanland is a plateau with fertile soil for both food and cash crops, the Esan people are mainly farmers, but at the subsistence level. It has few rivers; in some places, rivers are absent. While mountains and igneous rocks are visibly absent, valleys and hills are relatively small. Such an environment undoubtedly influences their worldview, including their "understanding of the universe in relation to man" (Alli 2011, 6).

Ontological beliefs permeate the entire life of the Esan people. An understanding of this ontology is fundamental to the understanding of the Esan perception of reality and the place of man in the totality of this reality. It will enable a projection into the Esan moral beliefs and relations concerning various beings, including the various components of the natural environment. The goal of the study is to survey how Esan ontology, and its subsequent union of beings, promotes harmony and integration among beings. It is also to project and encourage a moral relation with nature that result from conviction

rather than prescription. This study argues that there is an interrelationship among beings in Esan, which promotes due consideration for the other. This interrelationship results from the recognition of mutual co-dependence, which inevitably leads to existent union among beings in Esan thought.

To meet the above objectives, the study is divided into sub-sessions. It begins with a brief biography of the Esan people. It analyses generally, but briefly the concept of ontology; and then engages in detailed analyses of Esan ontology, such as the structure of being, animation, totemism, the hereafter and causality. From this ontological presentation, the study derives and analyses the union of being, and concludes by highlighting some implications of this ontological belief, including those which can foster harmonious relations with the human being and the natural environment.

2. The General Notion of Ontology

Put simply, ontology is the study or theory of the nature and structure of reality. It is the study of being as such, of the ultimate nature of things, of being *qua* being. Being in metaphysical cognition is *whatever is*. It could be actual or potential, real or possible, concrete or imaginable, mental or extra-mental, linguistic, extra-linguistic or meta-linguistic, necessary or contingent. "Some philosophers use this term as a synonym for *metaphysics*; others use it as the name for one main branch of metaphysics, the other being *cosmology*" (Halverson 1967, 499), which is the study or theory of the origin and structure of the physical universe. Rational theology and rational psychology can also be considered as other branches of metaphysics. As a substitute for metaphysics as a whole, ontology is the general theory of being. Ontologically, reality exists independent of the human mind. Ontology is concerned with the study of pure being, that is, being in its most abstract aspects. It is also concerned with what underlies existence or the fundamental substratum of what there is. What exists may or may not manifest. When it manifests or appears, it is called *ontophany*. Therefore, ontophany is the appearance of being or the manifestation of existence (Feinberg, and Shafer-Landau 2002, 786). The study of ontology is crucial in philosophy. This is because our ontological understanding and interpretation of the world reasonably determine

the type of solutions we are likely to proffer to issues of common interest. This is true concerning the way we do science, build society, and relate to our fellow human beings. When philosophy abdicates commitment to a general ontology, it risks losing its foundation, because it would have the outlook of a discipline without a clear-cut subject matter (Asouzu 2007, 17).

This would negate the inherent character of the self-definition of philosophy which shapes and directs our world outlook. Ontology "asks such questions as: "What is or what exists?" "What kind of thing exists primarily?" and "How are different kinds of being related to one another?" (Bunnin and Yu 2004, 491).

The ontological grounding of reality has been a subject of rumination in philosophy. Some ancient philosophers focused their attention on this. The first known philosopher to be involved in this ontological grounding of reality is Thales. Thales, who is the first of the philosophers of the Milesian school, argues that the basic constituent which underlies the totality of reality is water. His pupil Anaximander opines that it is Apeiron (unknown), since if it is known; it will submerge every other thing. Whereas for Anaximenes, this basic stuff is air, for Pythagoras, it is number. While for Heraclitus, it is fire, for Empedocles, it is a combination of earth, air, fire and water. Anaxagoras submits that everything is a component of all things. In any reality, there is the particle of all things but the particle of that reality predominates. The atomists – Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus – argue that the foundation of existence is the atom. In the modern period, Leibniz calls it monads. What underlies these various philosophizing is that there is a basic ontology which connects, underlies and constitutes the multiplicity of existence. This means things are not completely different from one another; rather, they have common ontological stuff or element. Some other philosophers have also searched for foundations in the modern and contemporary periods. Remarkable among them are Rene Descartes (Descartes 1989, 21), believed to have laid the foundation for, or charted the course of philosophizing in the modern period and noted for his 'methodic doubt', and Edmund Husserl in the contemporary period with his notable theses of starting from a 'presuppositionless position'. But their search was of a different kind from the ancient temperament. While the ancient philosophers were searching for the metaphysical foundation of reality, these other philosophers were searching for the metaphysical foundation of truth or knowledge. Despite their divergent focus, however, their engagements point to the fact that the search for a foundation is characteristic of philosophy.

3. Ontology in Esan Thought

This section focuses on explicating the notion of ontology as a background to understanding reality in Esan thought. Here ontology is taken as the study of being or as that which constitutes or underlies reality. Generally, beings have ontological status. To have ontological status is to belong to an ontological category; "it is to state in what precise sense it is true to say that that thing *is*" (Halverson 1967, 499). In the Esan worldview, realities are not ontologically distinct but synchronized. To be ontologically distinct means to belong to a different ontological category such that none is explainable in terms of the other. Justina Ehiakhamen seems to allude to this claim when she asserts that "to be real for the Esan is to be fused to or entangled within a community of forces whether active or passive…." (Ehiakhamen 2014, 98). According to her, Esan metaphysics envelops

all sorts of beings into its fold. Humans, lower animals, invisible but experienced forces, trees, stones, water bodies, and so on are all part of the Esan world of being because they in some form or the other emit or absorb energy or force…. Thus, in whatever realm of existence a being is found in Esan – visible or invisible – what remains common to all beings is that they possess force in one form or another (Ehiakhamen 2014, 98).

Isaac Ukpokolo substantiates this claim when he argues that

[i]n the conception of reality in indigenous Esan thought systems, there exists a duality of realms – material and immaterial, separable but not always separated. This duality constitutes a whole, a unity or a one. Beings existing in these realms of the material and the immaterial are animated or vitalized by the ontological principle of "forces" called ahun or orion or etin. All these translate as "energy," "strength" or "power." The source or origin of this ontological principle is Osenobluwa, the Supreme Being (Ukpokolo 2014, 93).

This principle of reality (force) is in living beings, spirits, including the dead or ancestors, and the community. According to Ukpokolo (2014, 93), there is a network of relationships that exists between these beings through the category of force. This network of forces is sustained in a harmony. The harmony constitutes a whole reality or ontology. Any act performed generates or emits a quantum of energy. Acts that emit vice-carrying energy destabilize the order of reality; it alters the state of equilibrium of the network of interactions among beings. This results in a metaphysical disharmony, which manifests in the physical life of the individual and his community. Evil, therefore, is a violation of moral codes; it breaks the bond of integration of the self by corruption. It also breaks the order of reality. Evils that alter the harmony of forces can result in death. What this means is that evils are capable of bringing, and do bring grave metaphysical injury to the doer, his community and even the natural environment. The fact that the evil act of an individual can have negative consequences on other people, the community, and non-human realities suggests that there is an ontological connection or (inter)relatedness among them. For example, such evil can impair plant and animal fertility or well-being and, by extension, affect food production; it can also affect the river, breeze, and so on. The preceding explains the connection between metaphysics and morality. Evil or wrongdoing disconnects the wrongdoer's moral state and his ontological state of being, as well as the collective sanctity of the existence of members of his society at large. The metaphysical gravity of immoral acts and the gravity of the inevitable outcome of such acts make it imperative to urgently resolve them and restore harmony and order. In the belief and concrete practices of indigenous Esan people, this restoration procedure ranges from rituals and sacrifices to sanctions. Once these are done, and the individual repents of or atones for the injury done, he is restored and will be in harmony with reality (Ukpokolo 2014, 94). Not only this, his community, nature and other beings, which suffer or may suffer from the dislocation due to his wrongdoing, are also restored.

4. The Notion of Being in Esan Thought

The attempt here is to analyse, in some detail, some components of Esan reality to the extent they can help in x-raying her ontology. We begin with the analysis of the structure of being.

4.1 Structure of Being

Here, we employ the concept of "structure of being" and not "hierarchy of being," as most scholars would ordinarily do, because hierarchy necessarily implies ontological class distinctions, which implies relations between superior and inferior. Although all hierarchies are structural, not all structures are hierarchical. It may be correct to say that the ontological valuing of human beings over other life forms in the teleology of a chain of being, which has been a key feature of the European thought system (Keller 2009, 207;

Kanu 2015, 242-247) is a wrong depiction. Besides, the hierarchical valuing of human beings, which permeates some African thoughts is also a wrong depiction. Ontologically, there are forces in nature, which emit energy. These forces have metaphysical links among themselves such that they affect each other. For instance, there are some invisible operative forces in the breeze, river, moon, sun, space, plants, and animals. These natural phenomena are believed to have their inherent, independent energy, which they exude, and which can be harnessed for good or bad depending on the agent harnessing them and for what purpose. Sometimes the being's force may not conduce to the result to which it is harnessed if it foresees innocence on the part of the intended victim. Sometimes, it boomerangs.

The Esan ontological structure of being is constituted of God, divinities, spirit, ancestors, man, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and other elemental forces of nature, such as breeze, sun, moon, and star (not in hierarchical order). This ontology is not anthropocentric, as most African writers, such as John Mbiti would want us to believe (Mbiti 1969, 15-16). Mbiti writes that "[m]an tends to be anthropocentric. He regards every other thing to exist for his sake and that, it is through him, in him and for him that things derive and have their meaning and significance. All things man feels are centering around him, and made for him. This is because he recognized his unique and distinct position in creation" (Mbiti 1969, 80). But in the Esan metaphysical scheme or structural categorization of beings, the position of man, in reality, is not that of dominion, privilege or supremacy. Man, shoulders some moral and ontological responsibilities for some other beings, visible or invisible, just as other beings shoulder their responsibilities for the totality of reality. The beings in this structure, which we shall now examine, include God, divinities, ancestral beings, spiritual forces, man, non-animate objects, animals, and plants.

God or The Supreme Being is called *Osenobulua* in Esan. He is believed to be the maker, ultimate controller and sustainer of the universe and all there is. Held in the highest esteem, all modes of worship and supplication are ultimately channelled to Him through intermediaries, such as divinities, spirits and ancestors. Although most cultures believe that since the foundation of the world, God has foreordained whatever will be, for the Esan on the contrary, given the facts of the vicissitudes of life and her disposition to quick actions, it is believed that this God can still

be spurred into actions for a quick result, hence, the saying: *Airekpaosenobulua no ose no buluada rekpaoria.* This means, "you help God to enable God to help you." Although He has channelled the course of events and human history, he still leaves some allowances for details, just like a playwright who writes the substance of a play but leaves some details to the discretion of the actors. But, indisputably, He is awesomely great and can be imagined or understood through His creatures and influences.

Next to be examined in this structure is Man. In Esan ontology, man includes male and female human beings who are alive and those who are yet to be born. In this metaphysics, man is not supreme among other beings, since we have only one Supreme Being. This man is saddled with commitment. He lubricates interactive intercourse to ensure harmonious relations among beings. He too needs this very structure or the forces of the beings therein, to become a person, and realize his importance and possibilities. This may be why Ukpokolo argues that "[i]n traditional Esan culture, the human personality, or the human individual, is known to exist and necessarily locatable and located within a structure of beings or communion of beings or forces…. The individual human personality, therefore, finds location within the structure of beings or interplay of forces" (Ukpokolo 2011, 21). Again, Ukpokolo argues that

[i]n Esan belief system, the human person (Oria, Oya or Ohan) is a composite whole of substances, whether material, immaterial or even quasi-material. These are egbe (the physical or material body), Elimin (spirit), Okhole (mind) and ehi (destiny guardian or what some would now call one's angel). All of these, put together, do not yet constitute a person unless and until the spark of the Supreme Being's energy of force vitalizes or energizes the composite and gives it life. This spark, which is the underlying essence of the life force of a person, the Esan calls orion, etin or ahu (force of strength, also referred to as soul) (Ukpokolo 2011, 21).

He explains further that *in the midst of all this, what the individual human person becomes is dependent on how he/she lives, and promotes harmony in the community of beings. He is, therefore, able to become what he is destined to become…. Removed from this holistic ontological structure, the human person is not able to accomplish a fulfilled life. And, to be sure, causing disharmony in the community and relation of beings by individual actions and inactions creates a problem*

not only for the individual but also for the entire community of beings, hence the need for atonement. Herein lies the connection between metaphysics and ethics in the consideration of existence and fulfilment of life and relationship among the traditional Esan people… (Ukpokolo 2011, 24).

Valentine Obinyan opines that the Esan see the human person as a possessor of value and dignity; he is a communitarian being. Part of his duty is to promote, protect, and utilize nature according to the desire of his maker. In Esan cosmological belief, therefore, man sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavours to live in harmony with everything in nature. In this way, the visible and invisible parts of the universe are at his disposal for utilization through physical, mystical, and religious means. This is why man must reverence nature as the altar of God who is at the top of everything. From Obinyan, it is evident that man is not the measure of all things, since there are forces that can mar or make him in his dealings with them (Obinyan 2014, 4-5).

Divinities are other constitutive parts of the Esan structure of being. Divinities may be primordial or deified (Alli 2006, 46-47). While Primordial divinities are beings created by God in the supernatural order, such as *ojiuu, osun* and *ayanto*, deified divinities were once human beings who, by their exemplary life, are deified by people after their death. Some are individual persons claimed to have mysteriously turned into rivers or hills to shield their kin from being captured or killed by external aggressors. Because of this feat, they attract human reverence and appreciation. Christopher Okojie argues that in Esan, people who have lived exceptionally well are deified.

A man who led his people to victory in the ravaging intertribal wars, a man who sacrificed himself to save his village, a man who started a settlement or a man who performed great feats in his lifetime; all these usually at their death, were deified and became the common juju – EBO of their respective communities. Each town of Esan had its great men whom today are represented by shrines (Okojie 1994, 216-217).

Such shrines, which are also the names of the deified divinities include *ukhuehkie, omonruare, ogun, edion, onobi, omobo, ekpenijie, amese, idigun, osun,* and litanies of others. The reason for deifying such people with extraordinary feat is to attract more blessings and protection from them or to serve as intermediaries between the living people and God. The Esan people believe that, at death, such people are more capable of rendering such services for their well-being, since the world beyond the physical is believed to be more suffused with power. These divinities are God's ministers who handle some specific portfolios. This is why Esanland is replete with different deities, such as the gods of the river, fertility, thunder, iron, soil, and, the gods of so many things, depending on the community. These deities are under the supervision of the Supreme Deity and are answerable to Him. The worship of any of these deities is hardly pervasive in the whole of Esanland. Where they are worshipped, they are expected to protect and bring good luck to those who worship the Supreme Deity through them. These divinities can be angered by human desacralizations, capable of altering the scale of balance among beings. It is believed that these divinities can inflict vengeance or calamities not only on the offender but also on his relatives and the whole community unless the altered harmony is restored immediately. Part of the functions of the gods is not to legislate but to implement the wishes of the Supreme Being and dispense justice since men might be defective or incapacitated in ensuring or implementing absolute justice. They can also be consulted to know the wish of the Supreme Being.

Ancestors are part of the structure of being; they are the deceased members of the family who attain specific old age before their death and who are accorded necessary burial rites. In the absence of these burial rites, they are detached from the ancestral world and would be roaming the world of the spirits aimlessly. For this reason, they can aggressively mar members of the family for failure to oblige them with what would make them qualify as ancestors. Once the deceased join the ancestors, a union or relationship is usually established with them. The family maintains this relation by offering libations and rituals at designated shrines, either to appease them when they are wronged, to prosper their well-being in the ancestral domain, or to supplicate them. While they enjoy these benefits from humans, they, in turn, respond to human expectations by way of protection, provision and the offering of fore-knowledge to them. Failure on either side strains this relationship, but it is the human being who suffers physically and whose duty it is to locate the source of such strain and restore it.

Spirits also constitute part of the Esan structure of being. There are different conceptions of spirit in Esanland. A sect of spirits is made up of beings that are created as spirits. This sect monitors or

supervises human activities. Another sect of spirits appertains to those who die before their actual time of death. Such death may occur either through any form of accident, evil machination, and vengeance from divinities or ancestors due to the wrong act of the deceased, his relatives or the community. The spirits of those who died unnatural death are always aggressive and vengeful. They are believed to always appear as ghosts physically and manifest in dreams. Their temperament or apparitions can be quelled by employing the services of native doctors. If the spirits are those of loved ones, they can be appeased.

Animals and plants are also parts of the structure of beings. They play significant roles in Esan ontology in strengthening the bond and maintaining the relationship among beings. Apart from being the source of human nourishment, they have independent energy which they emit. Some have become totems because of the role they played (totems will be explained later in detail). In some cases, it is only the inherent independent energy, which these beings possess, that can satisfy specific supernatural forces in redressing anomalies and in appeasements. Specifically, animals, such as dogs, fowls, goats, rabbits, antelopes, and leopards, as well as plants, such as iroko (*unoko*), neubodia leavis (*ukhinmin*), *aghemen, akwobisi,* and so on, have independent energy. But the power inherent in them can be manipulated, and extraneous power can be imputed into them to cause evil, harm, or impair well-being. Animals, plants and other natural phenomena and objects, as John Mbiti puts it, "constitute the environment in which man lives, provides a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them" (Mbiti 1969, 16). This is particularly true about the Esan people and their ontological conception of reality.

Non-animate objects are other essential parts of the Esan structure of being. The term "non-animate objects" is preferred and substituted here for the more commonly used term "inanimate object", for logical reasons. Logically speaking, inanimate objects may mean objects that cannot be animated. But in the Esan worldview, all objects can be animated. Examples of these objects include rivers, hills, valleys, space, water, wind, celestial bodies (such as the sun, moon and star), and so on. Like plants and animals, they constitute a part of the human environment. They help to nourish man and other parts of living nature in one way or the other. Besides, they possess some powers which may be used for good or bad by those who have privileged access to them. Man maintains a relationship with them as part of the total environment for the good of existent beings. Regarding the African, John Mbiti puts it summarily thus:

This anthropocentric ontology is a complete unity or solidarity, which nothing can break up or destroy. To destroy or remove one of these categories is to destroy the whole existence including the destruction of the Creator. One mode of existence presupposes all the others, and a balance must be maintained so that these modes neither drift too far apart from one another nor get too close to one another. In addition..., there seems to be a force, power or energy permeating the whole universe.... A few human beings have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use it, such as the medicine men, witches, priests and rainmakers, some for the good and others for the ill of their communities (Mbiti 1969, 16).

Mbiti's position is apt here except for its anthropocentric labelling. For the Esan, this non-hierarchical structural ontology seems egalitarian. It is neither human-centred nor privileged nor anti-human or human underprized.

4.2 The Ontology of Animation

Following closely from the preceding structure of being, is the ontology of animation in Esan thought. Although beings have their individuations, there are interactions between them. This interaction may be by animation. A being can animate or be animated by another. In this process, one being infused its being-ness or nature or characteristics into another. Once animated, the being takes on the character (force or energy) and significance of the animating being and enjoys all of its privileges (power and reverence). It can only take on again its real being when the animating force leaves it. Why does a being animate another? A being may animate another when it is thought to be remote. It thus makes its presence felt by making its force more available for use. There are beings likely to be animated by other specific beings. An animating being does not seek the consent of what it intends to animate before it imbues it with its force, character and significance. Now, how do we recognize that a being is animated, and by what? Since specific beings have some specific manifestations or unique characters, we know that a being is animated by another when it is seen manifesting these character(s) of another. Conversely, we know that a specific being has animated another being when we see its character being manifested and its power being exuded by another being. We sometimes know by divinations,

revelations by those believed to have privileged access or those trained to have access to knowledge removed from ordinary human experience.

Some beings can animate or be animated for harm. Such animation is influenced by malicious beings such as the devil (*elimin ebe)*, witches and wizards, and diabolic human beings, such as medicine men and native doctors. Such agents infuse the being they animate with malevolent wish, spirit or force to harm either the specific victim(s) or disrupt normality and order, impede progress, instigate confusion and aberration, monitor activities of some human beings, and in general impute negative influences. In this case, dogs, pussycats, goats, wall geckos, and so on, can be mystically animated. Human beings can also be animated. When animated, the animating force operating in him will make him act out of his will, but in accordance with the set plan of the animating being.

4.3 The Ontology of Totemism

Totemism is "the belief in a relation between man and animals or plants, taken as emblems." It is different from animal worship in that it does not place the animal totems in the status of deities; rather, it only expresses a relation between a body of persons and a certain animal (Lucas 1970, 231). The impact of totemism on indigenous people is great and diverse. It leaves definite traces of its operation in taboos observed by people. The Esan people believe that at different moments of difficulties, some animals or other objects of nature mediate by playing a role, which brings succour to such difficult moments. For example, during wars, such animals as *eyen* (snake), *akhokhole* (bush fowl), *akwaghanghan* (bush dog) and *eberia* (leopard), have been believed to conceal the path which people tread to make it unidentifiable by the enemy camp. Some animals, among which is the leopard, have also been believed to reveal some information about the enemy camp that save the people from being captured or killed. Some other animals in this regard include *ahienlenkpen* (hawk) and *oyen* (crocodile). Native doctors also make the snake a totem because they use its skin as an instrument for *okede* (native doctors' drum). Such interventions are not construed as merely accidental occurrences but as pre-arranged plans for supremely divine intervention. Besides, it is also possible that such animals on their own have special love and protection for such people and act accordingly on their independent energy. Some plants have served as harbour or solace to a tired, weary

person or group of persons and remedy epidemics. Some plants and animals have also provided food for people in a hopeless situations. The Esan people take such objects of nature as saving totems. The species of all these creatures are given selective treatments since the people see them as mediating interactive forces. It would become a communal vice or anti-communal norm to kill, harm or mistreat them, and a taboo to eat them. Sometimes they are imbued with human attributes and are, thus, seen and protected as human cousins and aunties.

Concerning the reasons for totems or why some people do not kill or eat some animals and plants, Okoeki Egbele, in an oral interview, narrates that people forbid some animals for saving them. Such people make a pact that they will neither kill nor eat them because they are their redeemers. It may be a communal or family pact. If they eat or use cooking and drinking utensils, which others used or touched in the process of their preparation and eating, they would either have a nose cut or develop an unyielding cough or fall sick in any other way. Before they can touch or use such utensils, such as plates, cups, knives, pots, and so on again, they have to pour ashes on them and wash them with soap to decontaminate them and annul the string of anathema attached to them. This ritual practice will have the temporary impairments, such as couch removed but the permanent ones (such as nose cut-off) already incurred remain. Prohibitions concerning these totems vary. While some forbid both the eating and the killing of such totems, others forbid eating only but can kill them. But when killed, they cannot touch them or use the proceeds from their sales. Nevertheless, they can show others the direction of the animal for their use. If they use the proceeds from their sales, just as it is in the case of eating, they will inescapably be attended with their attendant repercussions. Violations have practical consequences not only on the violators but also on progeny.

Animals regarded and treated as totems may vary in different communities depending on the animal that rendered unusual but useful function(s) to the people. The positions of John Mbiti and Olumide Lucas substantiate this claim made here about totemism. Their expositions show that this belief and practice is not limited to Esan; it traverses some other cultures of the world. For Mbiti, totems are part of our kinship.

The deep sense of kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life....

It is kinship, which controls the social relationship between people in a given community: it governs marital customs and regulations; it determines the behaviour of one individual towards another. Indeed, this sense of kinship binds together the entire life of the 'tribe', and is even extended to cover animals, plants and non-living objects through the 'totemic' system. Almost all the concepts connected with human relationships can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This is what largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual in the society of which he is a member (Mbiti 1969, 104).

According to Olumide Lucas, in West Africa, the influence of totemism, in strengthening the bond of fellowship in the tribe, cannot be over-estimated. This is partly because the possession of a common totem strengthens the feeling of unity in the tribe or clan. On the reason for the acceptance of totem, Lucas guesses that:

it may be that the clan or tribe is regarded as possessing some 'affinity' with the totem; it may be that the totem is regarded as the incarnate form of ancestors of the tribe. It may be that an ancestor or a leading person in the community is believed to have metamorphosed into the animal-totem which must therefore be never injured. Whatever the reason may be, the influence of the totem safeguards the unity of the tribe (Lucas 1970, 231; Kanu 2015, 289-299).

The respect given by West Africans to some animals is also partly due to the belief that the animals are incarnate forms of deities. For example, when a Yoruba passes by an *ijimere* "a red monkey" he salutes him as "My Lord" and gives offerings. When an Ashanti member of the Leopard clan accidentally kills a leopard, he laments his mistake by saying, "Alas, my brother." Such respect also obtained in Ancient Egypt where "the idea of an animal incarnation of deity is thorough and prevalent". To associate with mankind, a god "must of necessity become incarnate, otherwise, he cannot express himself in human speech nor act with visible effect" (Lucas 1970, 235). Fainos Mangena (2015, 3-4) discloses the belief in totemism in Zimbabwe. According to him, the Zimbabweans' revere for nature is not a matter of ideation, but fact. This attitude of revere for nature is expressed in their folk tales, proverbs and riddles. For instance, in their folk tales, animals like the hare and the baboon are personified. While the hare is given the designation *muzukuru* meaning nephew, the baboon is given

the designation *sekuru* meaning uncle. According to Mangena, this personification shows the cordial relationship between men and nature. For him, the idea of totemism motivates human beings to want to appropriate animal traits like courage, humility and cunningness. He argues that totemism enforces or encourages a sense of moral obligation to the natural environment, and thus environmental ethics.

Writing from a non-African background, Isaac Asimov argues that in primitive cultures, man's relationship to the rest of life on earth "was often considered to be close indeed". According to him, "[m]any tribes regarded certain animals as their ancestors or blood brothers, and made it a crime to kill or eat them, except under certain ritualistic circumstances". According to Asimov, "[t]his veneration of animals as gods or near-gods is called "totemism", … and there are signs of it in cultures that are not so remote". He cites as an example, that "[t]he animal-headed gods of Egypt were a hangover of totemism, and so, perhaps, is the modern Hindu veneration of cows and monkeys" (Asimov 1965, 684). The position of Asimov does not only indicate that belief in totems is not culture-bound, but it also aligns maximally with the Esan account; however, it diverges from it because in Esan totems are not venerated.

4.4 The Ontology of the Hereafter

The Esan people are firm believers in the hereafter. Such belief has some significance; it influences their practical way of living and informs their system of things. These beliefs include reincarnation, ancestorship, and gyratory existence.

Reincarnation is the belief in the passage of the human soul from one human body to another. It is different from transmigration or metempsychosis (a predominant belief in oriental cultures) because, although the former is embedded in the latter, the latter also involves the passage of souls among different species of plants, animals, and even non-animate objects. Reincarnation, called *iroso* in Esan, is the belief that, after death, the individual can be born again into the human family. There is no age range as to who reincarnates. Essentially, people are believed to reincarnate into the same lineage. This reincarnation may be immediate or delayed. The reason(s) for this immediacy or delay is not obvious. People reincarnate amongst others to reciprocate the privilege or affection they enjoyed from a particular person or family; to irritate a person or a family who hates the reincarnate in his previous existence, or to establish a union with

such family, since it is now a child to the family. People may also reincarnate to punish a family for the harm or evil done the reincarnate by becoming sickly or deformed, or by becoming a burden to such a family in any other way. Now, how do we know a reincarnate? A reincarnate can be identified either by divination, unique character, marks and tattoos, physiological resemblances, occurrences of identification marks given at death on the same spot, and so on. The kind of life a reincarnate lived in his or her previous existence can affect or determine his present state of existence, and his present state can shape his future state of existence. People can in the present wish for a better or preferred kind of life in a subsequent existence and engage in concrete actions to ensure its actualization. Names such as *Ebahili*, *Ebanehita*, *Ebatamaehi*, *Ebakoleane,* and *Asiazobor,* among others, reflect beliefs in occurrences of reincarnation (Airoboman 2012, 220-222; Odejobi 2015, 751-754). Pantaleon Iroegbu's submission diverges from the Esan account of reincarnation. Speaking probably from Igbo cultural orientation, he posits that "[o]nly good people reincarnate. It is a blessing and a privilege. The evil ones do not reincarnate and this is a serious punishment for their evil" (Iroegbu 1995, 82). On the contrary, in the Esan account, people reincarnate whether they are good or bad. The idea of reincarnation and the belief in the ancestral world do not create any rational problem of multiple existences concerning the reincarnated in Esan.

Another significant belief concerning the hereafter is ancestorship. There is the belief in Esan that the aged who die and who are given a befitting burial according to cultural requirements live in the ancestral world. There is a symbiotic relationship between men and their ancestors. Whereas the living maintains a relationship with the ancestors with worship, libation and sacrifices through the medium of other objects of nature, the ancestors, in turn, protect the living and are consulted for information for the welfare of the living. If this harmony is strained, it can result in calamity, including death, only to be restored by re-establishing a union with them. Shines are erected where they are easily reached.

Another aspect of the Esan ontological beliefs about the hereafter is *gyratory* or *alternate existence*. Gyratory existence involves the successive alternation of life, *ad infinitum,* in two worlds of similar activities. It may also be called *revolving existence*. "Part of the reasons which make death seems good and less grieved, and which relieves people from the fear of death and of

extinction, is the belief in... living a life similar to the present after death, and that of a gyratory life in two worlds." It is believed that the pattern of life in the hereafter resembles what obtains in this world of matter.

[E]ating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, labour and rest, birth and death, commerce, among others are features of the two worlds. In these two worlds, birth and death are successive phenomena…. [D]eath and birth in one domain lead respectively to birth and death in the other (Airoboman 2014, 80).

The belief in gyratory existence seems evident in the work of Julia Finomo Awajiusuk. Writing probably from her Port Harcourt cultural background, Awajiusuk argues that the traditional African believes in the existence of two complementary worlds (Awajiusuk 2012, 70). She quoted Ikenga-Metuh arguing that these two worlds are replicas of each other with only a tiny dividing line. Some other basic beliefs seem to authenticate this belief in gyratory existence in Esan culture. For example, there are instances where people, among those who dig toilets to some very deep feet, claimed that they heard the hawking of *imansa* and *ekaka* (baked corn), the pounding of yam, and other conversations in the spirit world. This implies that the spirit world is deep underground. What interests us here is not the raw data of these claims but the belief they generate – that there are ongoing constitutive activities in another world, similar to what obtains in the present world. The ritual of *ituhuki*, which is both a concept and a practice, also attests to the claim made about another existence constituted of similar activities. It implies that we have lived in that world prior to our present existence. As a concept, *ituhuki* literarily means "second burial of fool." As a practice, *ituhuki* is a ritual made to disengage from one's spouse in the previous existence in the spirit world. It is usually done by youths of marriageable age, who are either preparing for marriage or whose visions are impaired of wisdom and the facts of life. It may also be performed but seldom by a young spouse who did not perform the act before marriage, but this does not mean that all married people perform this ritual act. In this act, the individual appeals to his or her spouse in the previous existence to relent and forgive any grievance(s) held against him or her for making him or her a widow or a widower in that existence. He appeals to quell his or her anger and to withdraw all plans to impede, impair or thwart his or her effort in the present existence. Belief in and practice of *ituhuki*

in particular and the belief in gyratory existence in general, have some serious implications for concrete acts toward present and future environment, as well as future people in that they partly generate a kind of human obligation to the environment and future people. What would such an obligation be like? If we destroy the world at any point, we will surely inhabit or re-inherit it in successions, this world which we have destroyed. Besides, since we will continue to live and re-live again in successions, inevitably, we are part of future generations. Since no one would ideally like to mortgage his wellbeing momentarily for long term endless interests, he would relate with his environment decently and morally.

The Esan idea of the tri-circle of time – *arianusi* (past world or past existence), *arianan* (this life or present existence) and *ariabhe* (next world) (Okojie 2003?, 45-46; Odiagbe 2004, 3-4), – is a unified belief in the individual's multiplicities of material existence through time in a revolving circle. It also reflects the belief in a gyratory existence and its aftermath implications of human obligation to the environment and future people. These beliefs in the hereafter partly inform the Esan conceptions, attitudes, views and practices about the past, present, future, life and reality. It is important to note that these beliefs are not all limited to, nor are they all-permeating in all the nooks and craning of Esan. Some are held in specific communities and a community may hold the whole beliefs without any fear of contradiction or inconsistency.

4.5 Causality in Esan Ontology

Causality permeates Esan thought and her entire discursive universe. For the Esan person, the most satisfactory explanation for occurrences surrounding him is that they are caused. He believed that there are forces, visible and invisible, operating in the universe, by whose activities phenomena are generated, enhanced, diminuted or passed into nothingness. These forces include God, god(s), ancestors, primordial forces, medicine men, witches and wizards, and even man, among others (Airoboman 2012, 220-222; Aigbodioh, Idjakpo and Ehigie 2011, 1-9). Such belief is not limited to the Esan people. In Africa, there is a pervasive belief in mystical power. H.C. Trowell comments that "the African child is reared in a world where ghosts are more real than men, a world in the control of spirits of the dead. Magical conceptions and magical causations are the only facts of his philosophy. The pleasure or anger of the spirits is the causes of

all disease, famine, death, and the whole range of natural science" (Trowell 1935; Harley 1970, 197). Although Trowell's comment is grossly exaggerated, it, however, points to the fact that causality is profuse in African thought. In the African account of reality, supernatural explanations take precedence over natural explanations of all phenomena. This may be why Pantaleon Iroegbu avers that "the natural turn of events has a supernatural side to it" (Iroegbu 1995, 299). These views by Iroegbu and Trowell, except for the limitation already noted, perfectly align with the Esan conception of causality. It is partly for this idea of causal pervasiveness that the Esan people are deeply religious. They attach themselves to deities, who assist in warding off the negative causal events and attract favourable ones.

Although the veracity of the various foregoing metaphysical beliefs and their aftermath practices can be questioned, nevertheless, the people firmly believe in them since they help in organising their lives; and are parts of their meaningful, constitutive activities. Our task here is not to be judgemental but to x-ray the views of the people and what such views may indicate. These metaphysical beliefs are not end in themselves; they can generate peaceful and affable coexistence among men and the various parts of nature, both living and non-living.

5. The Union of Beings and Due Moral Considerations in Esan Thought

The foregoing metaphysical conception of reality implies a union, which exists among beings in Esan thought. In other words, ontological beliefs constitute the foundation of the union of beings; and it is this union that constitutes the bedrock for the harmony of whole reality and the ensuing, holistic moral consideration in indigenous Esan thought. This union, with its inseparable moral emblem, which is extracted from her ontology, integrates both human and non-human beings. The Esan incorporates past, actual and potential persons who respectively existed, exist or will exist at different points into the category of the human being. When the traditional Esan comes into contact with anybody strange to him, irrespective of origin, tribe or culture, he begins by way of introduction to locating a point, which unites both of them together. Ultimately, there must be a point of commonality either by paternal or maternal lineage, totemism, covenant relation, migration, sojourning, or any other way. At the end of the introduction, the Esan would say *okpa akokhin* – meaning "we are one". This expresses the

union among humans: an expression, which forms the basis of cordial and moral relations. This expression is not limited to human beings only; it is extended to establish a union with the rest of material realities or beings through totemism, animation, energy transfer, covenant relation, co-dependent existence, and so on.

In the conception of the union of beings, a union may be consummated or unconsummated. A union is said to be consummated when unity exists among beings such that they are completely indistinguishable from one another, that is to say, one completely diffuses into the other. In this way, they lost their individuations completely such that none can again be explained or compared with the other. Now, they are truly one. For example, when water in two bowls are poured together or when clean water is mixed with unclean one, the union is complete or consummated, since after the mixture each loses its specific identity, and it is no longer possible to separate them into their previous, original parts. On the other hand, a union is said to be unconsummated when there is accord with two or more beings but each still retains its unique, identifiable character or individuation. In this case, every being still consists in its identity. For example, as persons, there is oneness in us, yet we retain our individual identities. The consciousness of oneness infuses in us the obligation to see the other as our other self and treat him like ourselves. As different persons or beings, we are harmonized ontologically by an existent union which makes us ontologically indistinguishable beings.

The human person is part of nature, without which he cannot exist. Therefore, he has to lubricate the intercourse among beings to ensure harmony among them, as well as to guarantee his existence. Valentine Obinyan holds that "[f]rom the Esan Eco-philosophy, it is hypothetically purportable that we are because nature is just as nature is because we are thus man and nature or his environment are ontologically connected" (Obinyan 2014, 6). This explains the complete interdependence, which is an attestation of union for the good of the other in mutual self-giving. It acknowledges the other first as responsible for its existence. For the Esan, human beings carry the ontological weight of the universe as a duty. This implies the moral obligation, which man has for the rest of nature. Therefore, the kind of morality that would result from traditional Esan thought would consist in its extension to the whole of nature, future people and non-natural beings, such as ancestors,

deities, and even the deceased. Thus, the Esan scope of moral patient is all-embracing. The Esan extend morality to the dead because they are still counted as persons. Hence it would be a moral issue to spit on the grave because it is believed that a person is there. The preceding is a kind of *ontic morality* or *ontological morality* - the morality that springs from ontology.

Thus, the union of beings in Esan rests fundamentally on metaphysical holism. This implies that reality does not consist of discrete entities but of related beings that make up a whole. Metaphysical holism reflects ontological interconnectedness. In this ontology, there is no divide between humans and nonhumans. In this way, one recognizes the intrinsic worth of other beings (See Keller 2009, 206-207; Naess 1987, 35–42; Fox 1984, 196). The conception that there are no ontological boundaries between beings makes us regard the interests of the totality of being as our own. Bill Devall and George Sessions correctly assert that "if we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming ourselves. There are no boundaries and everything is interrelated" (Devall and Sessions 1985, 68; Keller 2009, 207). Thus, by protecting the integrity of beings, we are protecting ourselves and our interests. Therefore, we are beneficiaries of the harmony we maintain or cause to exist among beings. This Esan union would see the individual as a part of the interconnected, inseparable whole. He is as completely subordinated to the well-being of the ecosystem, just as other beings are in their capacity completely subordinated to it. The well-being of the whole inevitably implies the good of any of its parts, including the human parts; and the part is as important as the whole. None exists only for the other, and none can exist and have ontological relevance without the other. Hence it is evident as we have argued that in traditional Esan culture, the human being finds its existence, identity, meaning and relevance in the communion of beings or interplay of forces.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the metaphysical foundation of the Esan conception of reality. It analyses some Esan beliefs, including those concerning the immaterial components of reality only to the extent they help in establishing the union among beings. The study argues that the harmony which exists among beings is established, reinforced and sustained by the ontological connection among beings in Esan thought. It also argues that to be real for the Esan is to be fused to or entangled within a community of

forces. Such ontological connectedness fosters a close affinity between human beings and the rest of nature and the consequent human obligation to them. The beliefs in such ontological connectedness can trigger human careful relation and moral care, as well as serve as the foundation for moral obligation to the natural environment. In other words, the holistic connection and conception of reality in Esan ontology can constitute a general, veritable ontological foundation for respect and non-abusive use of the natural environment and thus, a workable environmental ethics that results from self-conviction. This argument from the Esan perspective is necessary and justified because most ethical theories are rule-governed. And morality is not backed with threat; otherwise, it would no longer be morality but law. Since most humans would not ordinarily continue to do what is right or good without some elements of threat, the Esan conception of the moral ontology that is based on conviction, rather than prescription, is germane to workable social and moral relations among beings, including the moral relationship with the natural environment.

7. References

1. Ahianba, Joseph. 2013. *The Vernacular Architecture of Esanland.* Vol. One. Benin City: Ever-Blessed Publisher.

2. Aigbodioh, Jack, Idjakpo, Godwin O. and Ehigie, John O. 2011. Metaphysical Causal Agents in African Traditional Society: A Philosophical Analysis of Benin-Traditional Thought System. *International Journal of Research Development,* Vol.4 No.1. 1-9.

3. Airoboman, Felix A. 2012. The Concept of Destiny and its Social Implications among the Esans. *Journal of Research in National Development,* Vol.10 No.3. 219-226. http://www.transcampus.org./journals, http://www.ajol.info/journals/jorind

4. --. 2014. A Philosophical Discourse on Death as a Relief from the Problems of Life. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies,* Vol.4 No.2. 69-86. http://www.ijorels.com, http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/ejournals/index.php/ijourel

5. --. 2016. Inductive Procedure in African Thought. *Humanity: Jos Journal of General studies*, Vol.8 No.1. 186-200.

6. Alli, Peter. 2006. *Esan Traditional Values and Roman Catholic Church: A Comparative Discourse.* Lagos: Deocraft Communications.

7. --. 2011. *Esan Cosmology and its Effects on the Social Behaviour of the People: Bringing all Things under Christ.* Lagos: Deocraft Communications.

8. Asimov, Isaac. 1965. *The New Intelligent Man's Guide to Science.* 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

9. Asouzu, Innocent I. 2007. *Ibuanyidanda: A New Complementary Ontology: Beyond World-Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Imposition.* Berlin: LIT VERLAG Dr. W. Hopf.

10. Awajuisuk, Julia F. 2012. *African Environmental Ethics* or Environmental Activism: Which Way Forward for the Niger Delta? *Journal of African Environmental Ethics and Values,* Vol. 2 May. 68-81.

11. Bunnin, Nicholas and Yu, Jiyuan. 2004. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

12. Descartes, Rene. 1989. *Discourse on Methods and the Meditations.* John Veitch, trans. New York: Prometheus Books.

13. Devall, Bill and Sessions, George. 1985. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered.* Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith.

14. Ehiakhamen, Justina O. 2014. Beyond Culpability: Approaching Male Impotency through Legitimated Adultery in Esan Metaphysics. In Imafidon, Elvis and Bewaji, John eds. *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics.* Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 97-106.

15. Feinberg, Joel and Shafer-Landau, Russ. 2002. *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy.* 11th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

16. Fox, Warwick. 1984. Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time? *The Ecologist,* Vol.14 Nos. 5&6. 196.

17. Gyekye, Kwame. 1996. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction.* Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company.

18. Halverson, William. 1967. *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy.* New York: Random House.

19. Iroegbu, Pantaleon. 1995. *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy.* Owerri: International Universities Press, Ltd.

20. Kanu, Anthony I. 2015. A *Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theodicy and Philosophy.* Jos: Augustinian Publications.

21. Kanu, Anthony I. 2015. *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues.* Jos: Augustinian Publications.

22. Keller, David R. 2009. Deep Ecology. *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy.* In Callicott, John B. and Frodeman, Robert eds. Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, pp. 206-210.

23. Lacey. A.R. 2005. *A Dictionary of Philosophy.* 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

24. Lucas, John O. 1970. *Religions in West Africa and Ancient Egypt.* Apapa, Lagos: Printed by the Nigerian National Press.

25. Mangena, Fainos. 2015. How Applicable is the Idea of Deep Ecology in the African Context? *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, Vol.4 No.1 January – June, 2015. 1-16. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v4i1.1

26. Mbiti, John S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy.* London: Heinemann.

27. Naess, Arne. 1987. Self-Realization: an Ecological Approach to Being in the World. *The Trumpeter,* Vol.4 No.3. 35–42.

28. Obinyan, Valentine E. 2014. Environcentricism: A Philosophy for a Constantly Changing World. *Global Journal of Human Social Science,* Vol.XIV No.V Issue I. 1-9.

29. Odejobi, Odetunji A. 2015. Self- Knowledge and Intellectualism: A Perspective from *Yoruba* Cosmology. In *Nationalism and Economic Justice in Nigeria.* Salami, Yinusa K., Famakinwa J.O. and Fasiku, Gbenga eds. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, pp. 747-789.

30. Odiagbe, Andrew I. 2004. *Esan/English Dictionary*. Benin City: New Era Publications.

31. Oguejiofor, J.O. 2001. *Philosophy and the African Predicament.* Ibadan: Hope Publications.

32. Okojie, Christopher G. 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Custom with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People.* 2nd ed. Benin City: Ilupeji Press Ltd.

33. --. ed. 2003? *Esan Dictionary.* No Place of Publication: Perfect Printers Ltd.

34. Olen, Jeffrey. 1983. *Persons and their World: An Introduction to Philosophy.* New York: Random House, Inc.

35. Shallo, Michael. 1934. *Lessons in Scholastic Philosophy.* Philadelphia: The Peter Reilly Publishers– Importers.

36. Trowell, H.C. 1935. The Medical Training of Africans. *East Africa Journal,* Vol. 2. Quoted by Harley, G.W. 1970. *Native African medicine.* London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.

37. Ukhun, Christopher E. 2006. Metaphysical Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought. *Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies,* Vol.1 No.1. 145-146.

38. Ukpokolo, Isaac E. 2011. The Anti-Humanity of Secular Humanism: An African Interrogation of the Secular Humanist Metaphysics of the Human Person. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies,* Vol. XLIII No.2. 1-25.

39. Ukpokolo, Isaac E. 2014. A Reinterpretation of Gender Power Play in the Metaphysics of Adultery and Moral Exclusionism of Married Males in an African Culture. In Imafidon, Elvis and Bewaji, John eds. *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics.* Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 89-96.

Oral Interviewee

Okoeki Egbele, 81 years old, (a farmer and an African traditional worshipper, native of Udowo-Irrua), was interviewed on 24-07-2015.